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### Recommended Citation

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**“How Could You Go There?!”**  
**Visiting Sites of the *Shoah* with the President’s Commission (1979)<sup>1</sup>**

Alice L. Eckardt

When my husband Roy Eckardt and I were invited in the late Spring of 1979 to become members of the just-being-created Commission on the Holocaust during President Carter’s term of office we felt both highly honored but also a bit subdued by the responsibility. We had been writing and teaching about the Shoah/Holocaust for a considerable time and had already been at a few of the concentration camps in Germany but had not yet visited any of the six death camps.

Many people have asked us: “How could you go?” “Wasn’t it a terrible experience?”

My first answer is: How could we not go since we believe the Shoah is a decisive event that has split time, and which challenges so many of our time-honored affirmations. That doesn’t mean that every affirmation of faith or of moral values automatically must be thrown out; but it does mean that every one of them must be re-examined and tested against the standard suggested by Rabbi Irving Greenberg: “No statement, theological or other, can be made unless it could be made in the presence of the burning children” – the children being burned alive at Auschwitz in the summer of 1944 in order that the SS might save a few pennies on the cost of the prussic acid being used in the gas chambers.

My second answer is that it was a terrible and a wonderful experience simultaneously – terrible because of everything we learned or were reminded of which had happened just three and one-half decades ago in Poland, Austria, Russia, and the Ukraine (and elsewhere in Europe and North Africa); and wonderful because of the courage and life-affirming spirit of the survivors who accompanied us. Also heart-warming because of some of the Righteous whom we had the chance to meet – not only in Denmark, but also to a limited extent, in that country of death itself: Poland.

We vacillated between the depths of despair and the heights of celebration, from the dark mystery of evil to the equal mystery of goodness.

Our route was geographically idiotic, but psychologically sound: In Poland – Warsaw, Krakow, Auschwitz, Treblinka; in the USSR – Kiev and Babi Yar, Moscow; in Denmark – Copenhagen; in Israel – Jerusalem and Yad Vashem, the Ghetto Fighters’ House, and the Christian moshav Nes Ammim.

Our own journey – that is, Roy’s and mine – began somewhat ahead of the main group

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<sup>1</sup> Presented in somewhat shorter versions a few months after the return of the Commission to the United States to a Shabbat service at a Brotherhood Brunch at Keneseth Israel, Allentown, Pennsylvania on February 10, 1970, and to a Temple Beth-El Shabbat service, Allentown, on April 18, 1980.

The trip was seen as an essential part of the Commission’s duties: to visit some of the most infamous sites, as well as inspiring ones, to learn what had been done elsewhere to memorialize and educate, and to establish contacts with some of the scholars and governments.

since we wanted to see some friends in West Germany, talk to some people there in the publishing field, and also visit one of my former students who had married a young German Lutheran pastor, and was herself studying theology at the University of Heidelberg. Our early start created some problems involving visas, passports, and ultimately the need for temporary passports since our permanent passports had to make the rounds of the Polish and Soviet embassies along with those of all the other members of the Commission.

We met the main group (of some 40 individuals) at the Frankfurt airport in West Germany. They quickly became close friends, and we had a few light-hearted moments before getting down to our task of establishing relationships with overseas scholars and government officials whose help we hoped to have in acquiring museum items as well as opening their national collections of historical documents and testimonies to American scholars and museum personnel. Roy and I already knew Chairman Elie Wiesel, his wife Marion, and seven-year old son Elisha who arrived with the others.

Then we learned that trouble had started for the Commission a week earlier when five visas were not granted by the Soviet Union: those of Mr. Wiesel, Rabbi Irving Greenberg and his wife Blu, plus Christine and Miles Lerman who were survivors of the Holocaust from Poland. What was the problem? All five had visited the USSR before and had made contact with some Jewish “refuseniks.” Wiesel’s visa was quickly secured by the State Department, but not the others. Should we go on to the USSR if four of our people were denied admission? The issue was still not settled by the next evening when, after an overly full day of activities in Warsaw, we all met at midnight in our private dining room to debate this question. The Polish waiters watched democracy in action. And the final decision to go was not made lightly.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Polish beginning:**

On the bus from the Warsaw airport we learned that we were to go immediately to three sites for wreath-laying ceremonies. But these were more than mere ceremonies for the first stop was the monument to the Warsaw Ghetto created by Nathan Rapaport.<sup>3</sup> Our new friendships were honed in our common need to remember and to honor.

On one side of the monument are the heroic fighters in the Warsaw Ghetto who against impossible odds and without any hope of either winning or surviving fought against the SS, the German Army and its Lithuanian and Ukrainian units. That resistance, in the spring of 1943, was the first act of armed resistance anywhere in Nazi-occupied Europe, and it was made without any assistance of arms from any of the Allies, even without psychological support or encouragement. And yet the fighting went on for much longer than the Polish nation had fought against the German invaders in 1939. Though it was a fight made without hope of success, somehow it was

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<sup>2</sup>The Greenbergs accordingly met us in Israel. The Lermans spent the days we were in the USSR visiting other death camp memorials. They gave the packed suitcases intended for Soviet refuseniks to some needy Jewish families in Poland instead. They then met us in Copenhagen.

<sup>3</sup> Rapaport also created a similar memorial in Philadelphia.

a manifestation of hope, a statement of faith about the future.

On the other side of the monument are shown the old and young, women and men and children on the Long March to death: a moving image of helplessness and tragedy for the Jewish communities of Europe – one that touched the non-Jewish members with special impact. The monument stands in a large open area with new apartment buildings surrounding it. This was once the center of the thriving pre-war Jewish section of the city, and subsequently the center of the walled ghetto into which the Germans forced some 500,000 Jews. Of this nothing is left. Everything was destroyed by flame throwers, artillery, and dynamite in the spring of 1943, during and after the time of removing, or killing, its Jewish population. The Germans succeeded in removing every trace of Jewish life in Warsaw. In fact, their last act after the Ghetto had been eliminated was to blow up the main synagogue of the city which was outside the confines of the Ghetto. By this act the Nazis showed their full intention, and revealed the basically theological nature of their anti-Jewish policies: It was the God of Judaism who was the enemy to be overcome, by destroying His people, houses of worship, and the Torah scrolls which attested to God/Yahweh. Not only were the holy scrolls to be destroyed, first they must be desecrated: torn, burned, cut up for shoe linings, used for wrapping fish, and defecated on. Acts of indecency, immorality, and cruelty were performed in the synagogues. And the rabbis and those most observant were mocked and forced to do things their faith forbade.

With us were several who had lived in the Ghetto for a time, or whose families had been moved there to die of starvation or disease, or later on, to be shipped off to a killing center.

A day later we visited the Jewish cemetery where in an unmarked, weed-choked field are buried some 150,000 of those who died under these dreadful conditions. Ben Meed could not restrain his tears as he showed us the spot so grim in his memory.<sup>4</sup>

Our second stop was just a block away from the monument to the Ghetto – the only reminder of a pre-war building: a mound at what was once Mila 18, an apartment building beneath which Jews had dug bunkers for hiding places, and then made them the command station of one of the Jewish fighting units led by Mordechai Anilewicz. When the Germans found the hidden entrance and began throwing in poison canisters, most of those inside chose to commit suicide rather than submit to being murdered. This then is the tomb and monument of more than 100 gallant and defiant resisters.

One of the most poignant memories is of our evening at the Yiddish Theater in Warsaw where we saw Polish actors portraying Jewish characters in a traditional performance which brought to life for a short time the community which was eradicated in such a few years. When the stage lights came up onto two of Marc Chagall's paintings on easels the subjects came to life

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<sup>4</sup> His future wife Vladka Meed lived on the "outside" (outside the Ghetto) passing as a gentile, helped people escape from the Ghetto, secured false papers for those living as non-Jews, and attempted to secure arms for those inside the Ghetto.

with movement, song, and dance. Then abruptly all of it was gone. Gone not just because outgrown or outlived, but rather because all of that life had been abruptly cut off. Now that there are almost no Jews left there Poles are becoming interested in such left-over reminders of the Jews' vital past.

The third commemorative site that first day was the monument to the August-September 1944 uprising by the non-Jewish part of Warsaw against the Germans, one and one-half years after the lonely Jewish battle. This uprising also failed (thanks to the Soviet Army's refusal to come to the aid of the city). And it led to the demolition of the rest of the city by the Germans on Hitler's direct order before the Wehrmacht withdrew. At this spot we were asked to sign a guest book, though not at the other sites.

Is there a lesson in this history?

The non-Jewish Poles had refused to aid their Jewish neighbors in their time of desperation;<sup>5</sup> and the Soviets refused to aid them, the non-Jewish Poles, when their time of desperation came.

### **Questions and Distinctions:**

A demanding question asks what the Holocaust is and what it is not. Does it include the millions of other peoples deliberately murdered by the Nazis? Resisters, most known Communist officials, nationalist leaders in the occupied countries, and wholesale numbers of Polish and Soviet people? No, it does not. That was murder, mass murder, perhaps even an effort at half-way genocide, but not Holocaust. That does not make it any less reprehensible, but it does make it different. And it raises different questions.

Why should we make the distinction? The Soviet Union and Poland refuse to do so, and this was one of the problems we kept facing in our meetings with government officials as well as educators and scholars in those countries; a position we kept arguing against.

The reasons we believe we must insist on the distinction are these: First, by making all the murdered simply victims of Fascism or Nazism, we limit the responsibility to one nation, Germany, in the time period of the Third Reich. Everyone else can be exonerated of blame, when, in fact, almost everyone was in some way or other an accomplice in the murder of Jews – even our own country and Great Britain in at least indirect ways. It makes it possible for Polish and Soviet officials to cover up the terrible degree of active help many of their people gave to the German murderers.

By contrast, we were told at every meeting, and at every site we visited, how much help

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<sup>5</sup> Even during the Polish people's 1944 uprising many Poles continued to seek to discover who living among them, even fighting alongside them against their common deadly foe, were Jews – and to kill them when they found out.

the Polish and Ukrainian people gave to their Jewish neighbors! Yet in our own group there were survivors whose families had been deliberately turned in or murdered by these supposedly helpful neighbors, or who had even experienced betrayal themselves.

**Living testimonies:**

It's time for a few stories by which I can make my point more explicit, stories about some of our fellow pilgrims.

Ben Meed was smuggled outside the Warsaw Ghetto in order to help find hiding places, obtain false identities and papers, jobs, and living quarters for others who might choose to try surviving outside the ghetto confines (at best a difficult enterprise). He also was assigned the task of helping smuggle into the ghetto: food and arms. He experienced betrayal over and over again, by collaborators with the Nazis, neighbors, and even by supposed helpers on more occasions than one cares to remember. His future wife Vladka Meed had even more such experiences, as she relates in her book *On Both Sides of the Wall*. So much so that she could not bear to return yet again, on our trip, to the ghost-ridden city.

Yaffa Eliach with her family survived the fate of most Lithuanian Jewry, but following liberation by Russian troops, a Polish Army unit moved into the area and shot whatever Jews they could find. Yaffa remained alive only because her mother and baby brother fell on her and so much of their blood covered Yaffa that the soldiers thought she was dead also.

Deanna Zborowski spent fourteen months hiding under a bed, only coming out to sleep in it at night. She had to practically learn to walk again when she was at last liberated. Moreover, because of the almost soundless whispers which were the only means of communication for more than a year, normal voices hurt her ears.

A second reason for insisting on the uniqueness of the Holocaust is that if we don't make a distinction we obscure the need to dig for the real roots of the hatred which made such wholesale murder of one people possible in a supposedly civilized and Christian continent. Moreover we are not dealing with something that is over and done with. Antisemitism is very much alive and well,<sup>6</sup> even in a country where practically every Jew was murdered or forced to hide or flee. That leads me to a significant event.

Eli Zborowski invited my husband and myself, and Robert McAfee Brown, another Christian, to accompany him and his wife Deanna to his home town of Zarki because he wanted us to have the pleasure of meeting a Polish Christian family who had acted out the gospel of love under very dangerous circumstances. With us was an NBC cameraman commissioned to make a documentary of Eli's experiences. He himself was a former Pole, though called "Toni" and now an American citizen.

Following a very humorous beginning on the outskirts of the town, with cows, horses,

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<sup>6</sup> This is even more true and worldwide in the "teens" of the twenty first century.

buses and other vehicles fouling up the sound track, we went to see Eli's home – a house his father had ordered built in 1928, and in which the family had still lived during the Germans' ghettoization process from 1939 on, and from which in 1942 they were to be deported to Auschwitz along with other Jews. Instead, three of the family were able to go into hiding with the Catholic family we were to visit.<sup>7</sup>

As the cameraman was photographing us arriving at the home of the rescuers neighbors began to gather. A woman leaned over the tall fence to ask who these visitors were. Her response, when given the answer, was an astonished and perhaps indignant, one: "Jews?! Jews are back here?!" Eli's wife Deanna, whose own terrifying hiding experience has already been told, looked around at the faces on the other side of the fence and commented to us that if you looked closely you saw curiosity but no friendliness; there was a coldness and hostility which she sensed. To her it was like 35 years ago. And we soon found out how right she was.

We were at the home of the simple but Righteous<sup>8</sup> Placzek family in Zarki – Mrs. Placzek and her now grown daughter – who, with her carpenter husband (now deceased), took in, hid, and fed Eli, his brother and mother for 18 months, at the risk of their own lives and that of their 8-year old daughter. Who is a Righteous one? Someone who shares the scanty food with three others, not for a day, a week, or a month, but for an unknown period of time which, in this case, turned out to be one and one-half years. One who must live every day of that time with the possibility of someone suspecting and betraying them; or of the Germans discovering the hiding place in the cellar or attic.<sup>9</sup> One who every day carries from the attic and the house the human waste for secret disposal since they had no running water or flush toilet (as was also true for neighbors). That's what it meant then to be a saint! No miraculous healings, but the miracle of love when hate ruled; the miracle of caring when so few cared; the miracle of lives preserved when death was everywhere. Simply one who still today says "My faith teaches me to help anyone in need. Why then do my neighbors hate me for helping you?" Notice that Mrs. Placzek asked why about the present as well as about the past. And yet she and her daughter still radiate that love.

Could it be that these neighbors secretly recognize that the Placzeks were the only real Christians in the town, and they can't admit their own shortcomings? (But probably not.)

I will never forget a final scene. Mrs. Placzek had requested a blessing from the two Christian clergymen in her home (though neither was Catholic): My photograph shows a Polish

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<sup>7</sup> Eli's father chose not to impose himself on the family but would take his own chances. However he was almost immediately shot by a neighbor.

<sup>8</sup> The Yad Vashem memorial in Jerusalem honors those it terms "Righteous Gentiles" for their efforts to help Jews escape from or survive the *Shoah*.

<sup>9</sup> Normally they hid in the attic, but when there was a suspicion that a Nazi search was about to be made, they were moved to the cellar where Mr. Placzek had cut out a portion of the brick foundation wall and created a narrow space behind it where the three could just barely fit standing up.

Catholic woman being prayed for by two American Protestants (Methodist and Presbyterian) with their English words being translated into Polish by a Polish Jew, now American. A truly ecumenical and international happening.

Just about this time three police came to ask who we were and what we were doing there, and decided to take the photographer to their station, even though he had all the necessary and appropriate papers and could speak to them in their language. Until they got official word from Warsaw that everything was on the up and up none of us was secure. After a bit Eli decided to follow. Deana became quite agitated, and so the rest of us with our two drivers, went there also, waiting outside for 45 minutes before, at last, we could leave Zarki and rejoin the rest of the Commission. But we would not forget this revealing encounter with both residual hate and enduring humaneness and love.

That very morning we had been at Oswiecim, now and forever known as Auschwitz – a grey, depressing town, and a railroad center where the sight of freight cars made us wince, even though these were innocent enough now. A sign requested silence from the crowd of visitors. The gates leading to hell bear the mocking motto “Arbeit Macht Frei” – “Work provides freedom” – even though in actuality this work brought about death. The courage of the five of our Commission who had spent months of terror, hunger, and agony at this infamous camp<sup>10</sup> and who now led us into and through its remembrances of horror was evident in their pained faces and tightly interlocked arms. The last time they had entered either Auschwitz or its larger portion named Birkenau they had been instantly torn apart from anyone who meant anything to them. Not this time! It was an involuntary action. For two of the five – Hadassah Rosensaft and Sigmund Strochlitz – their passing through that gate was occurring 35 years to the day after their first entering.

We then moved on to Auschwitz II/ Birkenau: high wire fences topped with barbed wire, barracks, and guard houses stretched endlessly, though in most cases only chimneys remain. Railroad tracks end here, and the “freight” was moved either to the showers and disinfectant areas or directly to the slaughter houses: gas chambers and cremation ovens conveniently under one roof. Death was an assembly line. Dr. Mengele had upstairs quarters in a nearby building from where he could watch the selection process when he wasn’t right there doing it.

As the end approached, the Germans tried to remove the evidence. Atop the ruins Elie Wiesel spontaneously led us in the *Sh’ma*.<sup>11</sup> Memorial flames; a pennant of the cloth used for the striped camp “uniform”; and a monument to the dead in all their languages – and yet no mention of the reason most were murdered: their identity as Jews. Bayard Rustin sang a spiritual and was embraced by Wiesel.

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<sup>10</sup> Elie Wiesel, Hadassah Rosensaft, Sigmund Strochlitz, ? , ?.

<sup>11</sup> This most important of all Jewish prayers, and most often used, is a declaration of faith and a pledge of allegiance to God, praising God (*Adonai*) and beseeching Him: “Hear O Israel, the Eternal is our God and the Eternal is One.”

An even more impressive and moving monument stands on the site of the Treblinka death camp, which we reached by a two hour bus ride through a quiet countryside. Treblinka was built explicitly to eradicate every last Jew of Warsaw and northern Poland. As we drove, the full reality of the numbers with which we were all so familiar began to come home to us as Ben Meed reminded us that before September 1939 a million Jewish people lived in this area, on small farms, in villages, towns, and hamlets; that there was a richly varied life. But today there are not even 25 Jews here. (Even the color of that vanished life is denied us now in the photographic mementos.)

As we approached the site, Raul Hilberg, the eminent scholar of the “Final Solution,” gave us some details of the camp he knew so intimately from documents and yet was about to visit for the first time.

The old rail boxcars reminded us of the human “livestock” sent here for killing and disposal. Remember, Treblinka was a death camp exclusively. There were no attached or nearby labor camps or industries allowed to select some few of the doomed to work and thereby live for a time; only those assigned to move the living from the unloading platform to the gas chambers<sup>12</sup> and then move the dead bodies to the pyres and pits for burning were allowed for a brief time. The awe and awfulness of the *Shoah* silenced us all yet again. But at last we found what we had missed until now: at Treblinka the Jewishness of the victims is remembered. All around us stood hundreds of silent stones, attesting to the communities destroyed, their people all vanished but for a few, such as our traveling friends Christine and Miles Lerman. Chris found the stone commemorating her community. Also here we saw the words which we all felt in every bone and nerve: “Never Again.”

Another one of the Righteous, a woman who was best friends with Chris’s parents, met us. She had been unable to do anything for Chris’s family since the Germans had snatched them up almost at once and sent them off to forced labor camps. But after the war, when Chris and her two sisters returned looking for their parents and other relatives, she was able to save the young women’s lives. Twelve Jews who had survived by some miracle (mostly labor and luck) had returned home to this village in the hope of finding family; among the twelve were the three sisters. But a group of local Polish Fascists determined to finish Hitler’s job, and killed nine of the twelve. They then went to this woman’s home demanding she turn over the remaining three. To refuse would probably only bring about her own death as well. So to keep the would-be killers at bay she told them, “While they are in my house I must be responsible for them. So wait until they leave tomorrow.” Overnight she was able to get them away to safety.

We had been in Poland only three and one-half days but it seemed as if a big part of our lives had become invested in these places.

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<sup>12</sup> The monument stands on the site of the gas chambers.

### **The Soviet Union:**

Just outside Kiev in the Ukraine is “Grandma’s Ravine” where 100,000 Jews were massacred in a few days by *Einsatzgruppe C*. A memorial simply identifies the victims as “Soviet citizens.” Thereby it denies the dead the identity for which they were murdered. Elie Wiesel expressed our dismay and protest as did our flowers and lament. Again Bayard Rustin sang, this time Martin Luther King, Jr.’s favorite hymn with its words “Before you’d be a slave, you’d be buried in your grave and go home with your God and be free. We’ll remember, we’ll remember thee.” The tears of an unknown Soviet citizen matched our own pain.

After that searing experience we all needed a quiet and light-hearted interlude – something the victims of course never received. A Ukrainian restaurant complete with balalaika orchestra and vocalist and choices of the best delicacies of the region provided exactly what we needed before we were to engage with Moscow.

Once there the gigantic Hotel Russia swallowed us; we were a blip on the screen of 5,000 guests spread around in 3,000 rooms. Nevertheless fellow diners were exposed to some Shabat singing and blessings. (Meanwhile a small representative group of the Commission shared a lavish meal, complete with vodka toasts, with a matching group of Soviet authors with whom they sought to establish an ongoing relationship.)

The next day’s Shabbat service at the central Moscow synagogue was attended by a mostly elderly congregation, due to serious difficulties young Jews have in attending, partly by the six day work week.<sup>13</sup> Some of the youth who turned up wore kippas made of folded newspapers. All the men crowded as close as possible to the *bimah* and listened intently to Elie Wiesel’s words delivered in Yiddish. Young Elisha’s presence on the *bimah* with him drew rapt attention from almost everyone. In the women’s gallery we visited with fascinated Soviet Jewish women through the medium of their Yiddish and, in my case, my not very proficient German. The friendliness of these isolated and deprived Soviet citizens, who had fought equally to defend the country against the Third Reich’s attack – and wore their military ribbons with pride – and yet still suffered discrimination, was overwhelming. The friendliness continued outside the synagogue where the weekly gathering of much of the Jewish community took place. We continued to communicate, but also gave away the coveted Star of David or Jerusalem pins we had brought, or whatever else we had. They were particularly interested to learn that Christians were an integral part of our group.

The next day, Sunday, we were scheduled to visit Red Square with its core of Soviet government buildings. But several of us instead chose to take a taxi to a large Baptist church which was equipped to seat 750 but into which about 2,000 persons crowded and stood (except for the upstairs balcony where they sat). This service was only one of six Sunday services, all equally attended. Moreover, speakers relayed the service to worshipers in the basement and

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<sup>13</sup> Prayer books, prayer shawl and yarmulkes were in short supply and impossible to replace, and we felt sad about the shortages.

outdoor worshipers. After meeting the senior pastor we were taken to the balcony and given seats where regular worshipers had been sitting (much to our embarrassment). But they insisted that it was to demonstrate their welcome to us.<sup>14</sup> It was a wonderful location to see all that was going on, especially when communion was served. After the ministerial blessing of the bread multiple baskets of broken bread were carried throughout the church, including to the balconies. (I don't remember, and can't find notes about the wine and whether or not any was somehow passed around, but I think not.)

### **On to the Danish nation:**

A day or so later at last we were headed for a country which did so much to save or rescue its Jewish people, consequently a land of hope – Denmark.

It was a roundabout trip in which we backtracked westward. As soon as our Finnish airlines jet left Moscow airport we all burst into “God Bless America,” and during our stopover in Helsinki we exhibited our sense of liberation by acting silly. As we flew on from there to Copenhagen we continued our singing, led by Bayard Rustin, much to the enjoyment of our Swedish and Danish fellow passengers – “Kumba Yar,” Negro spirituals, and “When Irish eyes Are Smiling.”

The welcome of the Danes was matched only by their consistent diffidence regarding their actions of rescue. Their response always was “Shouldn't one help one's neighbor?”

Denmark is the one country in all of Europe where quite legitimately the memorial is for those who resisted the evil of the Nazi scourge rather than for the intended Jewish victims. Our homage to the Danish victims of Nazi fury was totally spontaneous on our part as individuals, though an official expression of gratitude had been prepared in the form of a commemorative scroll.<sup>15</sup> Our reactions in Denmark demonstrated the absolute necessity of visiting that blessed country after Eastern Europe. We had the opportunity to meet Rabbi Melchior's son, at that time a member and vice premier of the Danish Parliament, and to visit the synagogue where his father had given the warning on September 29, 1943 for the Jewish people to go into hiding and to pass the warning along to others in danger. After the warning was given Danish fishermen set to work arranging clandestine night time trips to Sweden to smuggle Jews from hiding to safety in that neutral country. Only a few hundred were missed and hence seized by the Nazis and sent off to the camps. But the Danes did not cease in their efforts to protect these prisoners. They insisted on sending Danish Red Cross representatives to the camps to inquire about the Jews' situation,

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<sup>14</sup> The Baptists' welcome to us was such a contrast to the arrogance of Soviet scholars who sought to treat us as naive ignoramuses who needed to be instructed in the truth.

<sup>15</sup> At the same time a scroll of gratitude for Raoul Wallenberg's rescue efforts was presented to his half-sister. Wallenberg was sent to Hungary as a Swedish diplomat in the last months of the war to see what he might do to save Jews still living in Budapest. It is estimated that he saved tens of thousands of by handing out Swedish certificates giving them refugee status and pulling them out of the lines at the railroad stations where they were being shoved into freight cars to be sent on to a death camp. Tragically, the Soviet Army arrested him and sent him to a Soviet prison where he met his death. Why we would never learn.

and to send supplies to them. These efforts continued until the end of the European war, and managed to save many lives.

### **The trip's appropriate conclusion – the State of Israel:**

A flight via Vienna carried us to Ben Gurion Airport where a press conference was held with Gideon Hausner, prosecutor at the Eichmann trial, and Yitzhak Arad, resistance fighter from Poland who by then was head of the Israel Museum site named Yad VaShem and dedicated to the victims of the Nazi Holocaust. Rabbi Dr. Yitz Greenberg met us at the airport also and went with us to that very place in Jerusalem, our first stop. Dr. Arad showed us some new features, in particular the new Children's Garden with its memorial to Dr. Janusz Korczak who had insisted on joining the children of the Warsaw Ghetto's hospital to their death. We held a memorial service in the vast Yad VaShem indoor space. We also examined the original diary of Adam Czerniakow, the German-appointed head of the Jewish "council" of the Warsaw Ghetto who committed suicide when he was not allowed to save any of the orphans as the major deportations from the ghetto to a death camp began.

Then we headed north to visit Kibbutz Lochamei Haghetat and the Ghetto Fighter's House which these survivors had built with their own hands. We were met by Anton Zuckerman and others who made resistance a new watchword for Jews, and we were mentally transported back to our starting point, the Warsaw Ghetto. Here a fastidiously constructed model allowed us to see what the ghetto area had looked like in 1942 before the deportations and annihilations, as well as where its population met its end – at Treblinka.

On to the neighboring moshav named Nes Ammim, where Dutch and German Christians, and then a few Americans, affirmed and lived out a new relationship with the Jewish people and the Jewish nation. Their hothouse roses and their avocados, exported to Europe, earned money for Israel's hard pressed economy. Our spirits responded.

### **Lasting reflections:**

What concluding impressions did we come home with? From our new survivor friends: the absence of hatred and self-pity; the willingness to try to understand others' actions and to forgive whenever possible; the readiness to share their painful memories, but never to impose them on anyone who did not wish to hear them; the ability to recover from the worst that was dealt to them, and to build happy and useful lives, ever mindful of others' suffering in the present; the readiness to remember the few bright spots in the darkness, especially those which could even bring a laugh somehow. The love and mutual concerns of the families of these survivors, and the children's desire to know and vicariously share their parents' pain. The sharing of powerful emotions and the mutual support of all members of the Commission and its consultant group – Jews and Christians, survivors and those who had survived nothing. The memory of those marvelous Danes whom we – and Israel – will never forget.

Finally, on September 27, 1979 the President's Commission on the Holocaust signed its report, and, in the White House Rose Garden, Chairman Elie Wiesel handed the report to President Carter with appropriate remarks and solemnity. As a group and as individuals we

reaffirmed our common determination to tell the story and never to forget.

**Aftermath:**

The outcome of this trip and the response to the people and places we visited was then directed to the creation of a Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. to both commemorate those caught in that murderous past and to educate and sensitize the American people. There is something undeniable and ineradicable about the impression which pictures, displays, and historical objects can have. A center where serious study can be undertaken, and where people can come for answers to their questions is a basic need if we really intended to do everything in our power to see to it that "Never Again" would become more than an emotional slogan. Moreover, there is a constant need to counteract the work of the deniers, those who refute the Holocaust as an actual event.

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